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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001613

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FRENCH POLYNESIA: NEW PRESIDENT, UNCERTAIN FUTURE

REF: 04 PARIS 7928

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: Following relatively smooth by-elections on February 13, the Polynesian National Assembly elected pro-independence candidate Oscar Temaru president of French Polynesia on March 3 by a vote of 29 to 26 (with two ballots left blank). Temaru's election brings to a close more than 10 months of political wrangling on the pacific archipelago; however, his slim parliamentary majority leaves open the possibility for further instability. Temaru's election to the post for the second time in less than a year has profound impact on the future of French Polynesia. The ousting of close Chirac ally (and UMP Senator) Gaston Flosse, who ruled the islands for 19 of the previous 22 years, will likely be portrayed by the opposition -- perhaps optimistically -- as a blow to Chirac's leadership in Paris. End summary.

#### Infighting over Presidency of Islands' Assembly

2. (C) The political turmoil in French Polynesia began with the surprise upset of longtime president Gaston Flosse in parliamentary elections held in May 2004. Oscar Temaru became president of French Polynesia for the first time in June, but several parliamentary defections led to his ouster in an October no confidence vote and the re-election of Flosse. While some of those who crossed the aisle to join Gaston Flosse's coalition did so because of poor leadership by Temaru's inexperienced government, Australian diplomats tell us in confidence that there may be credence to the rumor that one defector was bought off by Flosse. Competing pro-Temaru and pro-Flosse protests broke out in the islands in October and November as dueling motions were ruled upon by the Paris-based Conseil d'Etat, the highest court for administrative affairs (see reftel). Ultimately, the censure vote was upheld, as was a prior motion to annul the elections in the Windward Islands, which resulted in a ruling to hold the February by-elections.

#### Feb. 13 Elections and Eventual Election of Temaru as President

3. (U) The run up to the by-election saw heavy campaigning by both Temaru and Flosse, as well as the emergence of a third party led by former Flosse supporter Nicole Bouteau, who pitched herself as the alternative to the corruption of Flosse and the calls for independence from France favored by many in Temaru's coalition. The February 13 elections proceeded well, despite fears of unrest and large demonstrations by both parties. The transparency of the elections and high participation rate (estimated at 80 percent) left little opportunity for appeal of the results. Of the 37 seats up for vote, Temaru's coalition took the majority (24), followed by Flosse's party (10) and Bouteau's centrists (3); however, when added to those Parliamentarians already sitting, the result was a divisive 27-27-3 stalemate in the 57-seat French Polynesia National Assembly. Flosse backed down from his pre-election pledge to resign if he did not outright win the by-elections, but was formally removed in a censure vote. The defection of one member each from both Flosse's and Bouteau's parties gave Temaru's coalition a 29-26 majority in the regional parliament, and Temaru was officially elected president on March 3 over Gaston Tong Sang, who represented Flosse's party. Bouteau and her centrist ally Philip Schyle honored their pledge to support neither faction and cast blank ballots.

#### Comment

4. (C) This second defeat within the last year would seem to spell the end of the 73 year-old Flosse's political career. However, there are those in the MFA and Overseas Department that feel the Elysee has not done enough to urge Flosse to move on in the best interest of those in the islands and the mainland who wish to keep ties between Papeete and Paris strong. With Temaru's slight majority in parliament (including one member who has switched sides three times in the last year) and relative lack of experience, some have speculated that Chirac may be encouraging Flosse to patiently await an eventual dissolution of the current government. Temaru was surprised by his victory last year and clearly unprepared at that time to govern; his ability to learn from previous mistakes and include centrists in his government may determine whether or not he will be able to avoid this outcome. To his credit, Temaru did not play the

divisive independence card in campaigning and has tempered his rhetoric since the election, insisting "independence is not on the agenda." Many believe that the Socialists, eager to exploit any chink in Chirac's armor with the French presidential elections two years away, will lend support to Temaru. Perhaps also seeking to capitalize on Chirac's perceived loss, UMP President Nicolas Sarkozy notably did not travel to Papeete for the election to back Flosse, a senator in the party he leads. End comment.  
Leach